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Abraham Lincoln: His Education and Moral Courage

L. E. McFADDEN, FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA.

WHEN a man rises from poverty and obscurity to the most exalted office in the land and discharges his duties with unsurpassed credit to himself and glory to his country, and especially when his rise to eminence and influence is unaided by personal attractions and embellishments, but due solely to the incisive logic of his ponderous mind and the righteousness of the causes he espoused, it behooves us to study the elements of his greatness and the causes contributing to their development.

The intelligence and ability of the average individual is conditioned by the intelligence and ability of the persons with whom he comes in contact; but now and then Nature shames our incompetence and inspires us with hope by producing a man possessed of indomitable courage and resolution, a burning zeal for knowledge, and an ambition to distinguish himself in service to his fellow men. Of such a type we have no better example than Abraham Lincoln.

Two prominent elements of his greatness—his education and his moral courage—are selected for elaboration, not only because of their importance as factors in his success, but also because of their educational significance.

Many attribute Lincoln's education to Providential bestowal. Many believe that he was ordained by God or fate to the work of preserving the Union. Many believe it to be impossible for a man of ordinary natural endowments to acquire his intellectual competency with such meager school facilities, and therefore pronounce him a genius. But happily there is no royal or providential road to success, or Lincoln's life would furnish no inspiration to ambitious youth; and genius has been defined as the capac-

ity for hard work and attention to detail. The means by which he won success were self-help, tireless industry, and painstaking effort stimulated by an ambition to excel in usefulness to his fellow men. These means of training and advancement are open to every youth in the land.

Many claim that Lincoln was not an educated man, because he was not graduated from any college or university and could not have gained admission to them. But I believe that Lincoln was educated in the best and broadest sense of the term. Education has been defined as the guidance of growth; but education is more than mere guidance. It is the acquirement of experience by self-activity functioning in right habits. A college or university student may be surrounded by the most carefully selected books, he may have the most scientifically prepared course of study to direct his education, and he may have the best teachers to inspire him and arouse his ambition; but without self-exertion he comes from the institution weakened instead of strengthened. Many believe education to be a matter only of books and school, but the child is educated by what he does as well as by what he studies and reads. The youth who spends his time in idleness and dissipation, and who indulges himself in falsehood, in acts of cruelty, in insolence, deception, rudeness and lawlessness, is sowing the seeds of utter uselessness and depravity.

Courage, will power and character are wrought by the courageous acts of humanity that one performs and not those he dreams or reads about. In the development of a noble manhood Lincoln had a training such as the winner of any intercollegiate honors might envy.

His giant strength was always at the service of the poor, the weak and the distressed. Limit of space prevents more than a brief mention of a few of the deeds by the doing of which Lincoln fabricated the warp and woof of his character: his carrying a dog across a river in answer to his piteous appeals; his delivered correction of a short-weight tea order; his thrashing the bully, Jack Armstrong; his rescue from freezing, of a notorious drunkard; his pulling corn for three days to pay for a damaged book; his

payment of the "national debt"; his resolve, "If I ever get a chance to hit this thing (slavery), I will hit it hard"; his climbing a tree to replace some fledglings that had fallen from the nest into the road; and last, but not least important, his rail-splitting.

When Lincoln saw the dog in distress, he went to the rescue and carried him across the river. When he saw the fledglings, he climbed the tree and replaced them in the nest. Had he only felt sorry for those animals in distress and allowed the emotion to subside without relieving action, he would have weakened rather than strengthened his character. Or had he killed those birds, and cursed the dog for his stupidity, he would have inculcated habits from which there could not have emanated the noble character which we so much admire. The most effective way to ruin the character is to make decisions and fail to execute them, to allow emotions to evaporate without proper response in action.

The truest test of character is prolonged application to distasteful work. Give a boy a piece of solitary work to perform, involving tedium, persistence and perspiration. If after an hour or two of diligent application he begins to think of the magnitude of the task, the utter loneliness, the irksomeness, if his resolution begins to waver, his destiny hangs in the balance. If he grips his resolution anew and through sheer force of will power executes the work, struggling resolutely on in spite of fatigue and all distracting influences, he will gain self-mastery, ability, courage, culture and increased will power—the first requisites of manhood. For such a boy there is hope. If he emerges the victor from every such test, the power he gains may be directed to other and more useful work; but the power to execute in spite of drudgery and handicaps will remain his most valuable asset in life.

On the other hand, if he allows the dread of work or the allurements of pleasure to gain the ascendancy, his will is weakened and after several such disastrous encounters with himself his will is dethroned and there is nothing left to drive and direct his energies. He finds no joy, no inspiration in the consciousness of any work well done. The future over which he aspires to no control is a blank to him.

This exposition is adequate to reveal the secret of Lincoln's power and courage. From every such test of manhood he emerged the victor. He did not have to whine or offer excuses for his lack of accomplishment. The result of this training is disclosed in the following episodes of his life:

In 1837, while Lincoln was a member of the Illinois legislature, that body passed resolutions denouncing the anti-slavery movement. Later Lincoln protested against the resolutions and denounced slavery on the ground of injustice and bad policy. Only one other member had the courage to sign the protest. Thus Lincoln early identified himself with the anti-slavery cause at a time when such espousal offered no chance for political preferment. When the Southern leaders enacted the Kansas-Nebraska Law, repudiating the Missouri Compromise and opening the territories to slavery, Lincoln's indignation could no longer be restrained, and he became the avowed and accepted champion of freedom in his own state, which was the only Northern state whose legislature approved the Kansas-Nebraska Law.

In 1858, when told by his friends that his "house divided" speech, if delivered before the Illinois Republican convention, would bring defeat upon his party and consign him to political oblivion, his noble and fearless reply was: "Friends, the time has come when these sentiments should be uttered, and if it be decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked with the truth."

While General Grant was negotiating the capture of Vicksburg, Lincoln criticized his mode of advance. But nine days after the capture of that city the President sent a letter to General Grant ending thus: "I now wish to make a personal acknowledgment that you were right and I was wrong."

During the war, delegations of prominent citizens importuned the President to compromise the difficulties with the South, stating that no efforts were being made to end the war by peaceful means. Even after the battle of Gettysburg and the surrender of Vicksburg, a movement was organized to urge the President to negotiate an ignoble peace with the waning Confederacy by sacrificing

the freedom of the slaves for the restoration of the Union. Note the courageous and uncompromising reply in Lincoln's second inaugural address: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may soon pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsmen's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it might be said, 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

At the beginning of Lincoln's administration his chief solicitude was for the border states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri, slave states which had not yet seceded. He above all others saw the necessity of retaining the border states in the Union and thus dividing the resources of the South. Three of these states had insolently refused to raise troops for the Union at the call of the President. But Lincoln's policy of mildness toward the South disarmed hatred and prejudice in the border states, and their retention in the Union was due entirely to his masterly statesmanship. This master stroke may have been the deciding factor of the war, as these four states and West Virginia, with a population of over three million Southerners, contributed more than three hundred thousand Union soldiers.

When Great Britain recognized the Confederacy as a belligerent power, Secretary of State Seward wrote a protest which he proposed to have our Minister Adams, in London, read to the British Minister of Foreign Affairs. In this protest he threatened war with England and reminded her that we had already whipped her twice. When Seward read the protest to Lincoln, he was simply requested to leave the document. By cancelling words here and there, removing its provocation, and instructing our Minister Adams to retain the document for his own guidance instead of reading it to the British Minister, Lincoln no doubt prevented war with England and perhaps her alliance with the Southern Confederacy.

When the Confederate commissioners, Mason and Slidell, were

forcibly taken from the British mail steamer *Trent*, when England began preparations for war and demanded reparation from the United States, granting only seven days for a reply, and when a great majority of the indignant citizens of the United States demanded war with England, believing with Seward that we could suppress the rebellion and defeat England at the same time, Lincoln surely averted war by magnanimously disavowing the act of Captain Wilkes and declaring that we had no intention of reviving the odious practices of Great Britain which led to the war of 1812.

Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation, the most important act of his life, was at a most opportune time, making the war a war against injustice and oppression and effectually preventing European interference.

Lincoln's moral courage was the most conspicuous element of his greatness and the greatest factor in the preservation of the Union. A weaker man, a less courageous man, confronted with Lincoln's difficulties and beset as he was by advisers, might have been cajoled by the enemies of the republic or misled by well-meaning friends into the adoption of a conciliatory policy, ending in the peaceable division of the Union into a southern oligarchy of slaveholders and a non-slaveholding republic; or through the lack of a well-matured and definite policy failed to rally the people to the support of the government and hence failed in the war for the restoration of the Union.

Thus in every crisis we see the master mind of Lincoln guiding the ship of state from the shoals and breakers, inspiring the people with loyalty by his firmness in the right, and by his abiding determination to save the nation at all hazards, by his consummate skill, patience, and resourcefulness directing the energies of the nation to the task of restoring the Union.

Another element of his greatness was his remarkable power of expression. No loftier sentiments were ever couched in more befitting language than his Gettysburg address, second inaugural, and letter of condolence to a bereaved mother. They are masterpieces of literature comparable with the best pieces of English

prose ever produced. A copy of his letter of condolence to Mrs. Bixby hangs on a wall of the Oxford University as a model of elegant literature which the world has never excelled.

On the memorable battlefield of Gettysburg, Edward Everett, considered the most gifted and scholarly orator then living, delivered a two-hours oration. Lincoln followed him with the immortal Gettysburg address, consisting of about fifty lines. Everett's oration is now seldom read. The speech of the cultured rail-splitter is admired as the most perfectly adapted to the occasion of any speech ever delivered, and is studied in our colleges and universities as a model of style in composition.

Whence came this power of expression? I believe that it can be explained as logically as was explained the development of his character. His first attempts at composition were crude and bombastic. Behind all improvements, literary or other, there must be a desire for excellence. Lincoln early in life perceived the importance of lucid expositions as a prerequisite to leadership.

See him scrawling notes from books on the logs of the cabin or any handy board. If, in reading, he came across an idea or a phraseology that pleased him, he would write it in a copybook. He so excelled in spelling that he was debarred from the spelling contests. He had such a passion for books and reading that he borrowed and read every book within a radius of fifty miles of his home. When a dictionary fell into his hands, he devoured it page by page. He read with as much avidity a copy of the statutes of Indiana as most boys would read a detective story. He walked fifteen miles to the county seat to listen to the arguments of the lawyers, and after returning home held mock trials, and from stumps delivered harangues to the field hands. During his storekeeping experience at New Salem he was often sprawled out at length on a counter studying a grammar which he had walked six miles to borrow, but which most boys of today would walk six miles to avoid. Nothing delighted him more than a day spent unmolested out of town, reading a book. After finding a copy of Blackstone's commentaries on the common law, he was often seen lying in the shade of a tree near the store devouring its contents.

He walked a distance of twenty miles to borrow law books and read diligently on the way back. Lincoln himself said that when he heard a word or phrase that he did not understand, he sometimes walked the floor late in the night until he comprehended the meaning and was able to express the same thought in language so simple that any one could understand it.

Almost any boy or girl having the desire and sufficient persistence and concentration of mind can acquire equal literary ability. But have they Lincoln's passion for knowledge and his power of application? Aye, there's the rub.

Let us recall the two great principles of education so well exemplified in the life and achievements of the noblest figure in American history, the emancipator of four million slaves, the preserver of the integrity of the Union, the writer of our second Declaration of Independence, whose life is an inspiration to every poor boy and a rebuke to the idle and inefficient, whose life has taught us that the best passports to enduring distinction are not a pretty face, fine clothes, wealth or social position, but character, sterling worth and social efficiency—these two principles of education are: There is no education but self-education through self-activity; and the only way to develop a noble character is to perform noble deeds.

In the words of Shakespeare: "His life was gentle; and the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to the world, This was a man."

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